

Hospitality: Open to Possibilities

Beloved community: I invite us to be together in a spirit of prayer. Holy Loving Spirit, we are grateful for the freedom and joy to be gathered today by live stream and on this land – loved by First Nations and many others across time and where we are now building our way of community. Today we hope to notice how hospitality is active in our lives and imagine its influence deepening in and around us. We trust you, Holy Spirit, to challenge and encourage us along the way. We pray this in the way of our great teacher, Jesus. Amen.

Hospitality is generally defined as generous, welcoming treatment of another - treatment that is rooted in deep kindness and warmth. Readiness to approach the other from a space of kind, generous welcome is as essential when first meeting someone as it is in every encounter that follows. Hospitality provides a starting point for connection. Continued hospitality illuminates the path forward as an initial connection grows into a relationship. Hospitality is essential work within a community of any size – two, twenty, two hundred.

Throughout the month of September, we will explore the theme of hospitality. Each Sunday, we will examine it through multiple lenses – seeing hospitality through a scripture reading, a contemporary text, our life as a congregation, and our individual lives. Let's recognize how we currently experience hospitality and imagine becoming more proficient practitioners of it.

While our faith teaches us that Love (also called God) is eternal – timeless and powerful beyond our comprehension, love generates human practices that can be tracked more concretely. I wonder if we sometime limit our understanding of the practice of hospitality by conflating it with hosting.

Our go-to example of hospitality might be someone welcoming another into a physical space and providing food and drink or other nourishment for their guest. Serving as a host is a beautiful action. I would suggest that the love-fueled spiritual practice undergirding hosting is as much generosity as it is hospitality. A host often goes lengths of generosity and selflessness in the efforts of preparing space and nourishment. We each have friends and family members who demonstrate a superpower of selfless generosity through hosting. We may even refer to them as a “consummate host.”

So if both generosity and hospitality are spiritual practices that inspire the action of hosting, then what IS the spiritual practice of hospitality and what OTHER actions does it inspire in our lives?

Today’s gospel story of the encounter between Zacchaeus and Jesus invites us to understand hospitality as an orientation or posture of openness to one another. **At its strongest, hospitality is a practice of mutuality. More fundamental to hospitality than welcoming one another into particular places or activities is the move to welcome each other into being seen and known.**

Having returned from sabbatical, I have now been re-immersed in our community life for two weeks. I have been powerfully moved by our Wednesday Community Supper, which continues to grow. Currently, an average of 45 to 50 neighbors gather each week. At first glance, we could think that our impulse to begin the meal eight months ago came from an impulse to host – to offer a generous gift to our neighbors. That was likely true (at least in part). Yet, in addition to the spiritual practice of generosity or hosting, we are also embodying the spiritual gift of hospitality.

You can witness the mutual welcome in the Fellowship Hall by watching how members of our church intermingle with the many members of our wider community and be noticing how members of our wider community or homing into the space – collaborating in setting the tables, offering to help serve, hanging out in the Fireside Room or lingering at tables to be in conversation after finishing their meal. We are all practicing the spiritual gift of hospitality on Wednesday evenings.

As we practice hospitality (a generous, welcoming mutual orientation that welcomes our whole selves), we open doors to limitless possibility for growth of companionship and community. Let's keep in mind the call of our Hebrew and Christian scriptures to love God with our whole hearts so that we can love our neighbor and ourself. In the context of hospitality, that greatest commandment of our faith tradition means that we are called to practice hospitality toward ourself as well as toward our neighbor.

As we consider the dynamics at play between Zaccheaus and Jesus, let's also draw insight from our contemporary reading - Mary Oliver's poem, "Don't Hesitate." We might well start with those words. She encouraged us, *"If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy don't hesitate. Give in to it... Joy is not made to be a crumb."* Words from Mary Oliver.

Let's see if Jesus and Zacchaeus hesitated. I think not. We heard,

[Jesus] entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus... He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way.

Can you relate to Jesus' joy in recognizing that someone went to lengths to see him? Has that happened in your life?

*When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.”
So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.*

Can you relate to Zacchaeus’ joy when he realized that it turned out to be worth it when he awkwardly climbed that tree? Each of these men could have done something much more expected. Zacchaeus as someone who may have been living with dwarfism, could have done the normal, which would have been – try to navigate through the space which would have been accessible for people of average stature, ask or not ask people to please make space, see if anyone might notice and make space for an equitable view of Jesus. Jesus, if he saw him up in the tree, could have just given him a little nod – a note that he had noticed the effort.

But instead, they engaged with such hospitality. The spiritual gift of hospitality begins as their orientation or posture of openness to the possibility of interacting with each other.

And then that openness naturally leads us to acts of hospitality.

Let’s hear Mary Oliver wonder about redemption. She said,

*“[M]uch can never be redeemed.
Still, life has some possibility left.
Perhaps this is its way of fighting back,
that sometimes something happens better
than all the riches or power in the world.”*

In speaking of redemption, I think she is also speaking of salvation. And these two men in the story realized that there was also more possibility – that they could connect on a deep level by sharing together and really seeing and learning more about one another.

Zaccheaus and Jesus risked awkwardness for the sake of hospitality. Let's hear about the moment of salvation:

"Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.'"

As Mary Oliver said, "much can never be redeemed." Zaccheaus may not have made it right with every person he had harmed. The important part was the redemptive moment of repentance – of him turning around and seeing a new way, having a change of heart.

Salvation is about accepting and participating in grace with one another. As Jesus put a punctuation mark on the moment:

"Today salvation has come to this house, because [Zacchaeus], too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Let us be on the lookout, open to the possibilities of connection and ready to participate in the mutual work of salvation with one another. Amen.

Rev. Clare Gromoll
St. Croix United Church (Bayport, MN)
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Luke 19:1-10, "Don't Hesitate"